HOLY SPIRIT, ENERGY OF GOD

May 18, 1986, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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"And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house..." --Acts 2:2 (RSV)

Scripture
Acts 2:1-8, 43-47

In the fourth and fifth centuries there emerged in Ireland and then Scotland a variety of Christianity uniquely different from the religion whose heart was in Rome. The Celtic Church contained within it much of the particularity of Celtic culture: independence, no little beligerency, enormous creativity, and vitality and energy. Celtic Christianity never quite accommodated itself to the centralization of the faith in Southern Europe. Irish monks argued with the rest of the church about the date of Easter, the style of monastic tonsure to be worn, and celibacy. They also created a unique art, borrowing from their Celtic culture. The intricately carved Celtic Crosses, often the symbol of Presbyterianism, are their gift to us. The richly ornamented Bibles they lovingly copied and decorated, like the Book of Kells, are among the artistic treasures of the world. They constitute a fascinating and often different chapter in our story.

I was intrigued to learn from Ronald Ferguson, leader of the Iona Community, on the Island of Iona, off the West Coast of Scotland, that the favorite ancient Celtic symbol for the Holy Spirit was the Wild Goose. Ferguson thinks we ought to pay attention to that provocative image and so do I.

The rest of the church, of course, regards the dove as the symbol of the Holy Spirit...from that incident, early in the story, when Jesus experienced the Spirit of God descending on him, as a dove, at his baptism.

The new logo of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) on our plaque on Michigan Avenue contains that symbol, although that twentieth century dove seems considerably stronger, more intentional than most of its fluttering, cooing ancestors.

I confess I've always had trouble with doves. I've never seen one that looks like the ones in Sunday School pictures. In fact I never saw a dove at all until I lived in Ohio, and there they are celebrities of sorts because every year the hunters of the State try to convince the State Legislators that doves are actually game birds. There are a lot of doves in Ohio, in any event, and the ones I saw seemed rather docile and fat and I always wished for another image for the Spirit of God, so was delighted with the Celtic alternative.

Besides, the spirit that came to Jesus when he was baptized may have been gentle, comforting and reassuring, but what it accomplished was to stir up within him such strength and determination and holy obedience that he was dead in thirty-six months, executed - not as a gentle spirital guru - but as a political troublemaker. And that Spirit which came to the friends of Jesus on Pentecost wasn't gentle and comforting at all, but upsetting, disturbing, enlivening, energizing. The Celts I conclude, offer us a necessary corrective...Spirit as Wild Goose - soaring on the wind, unpredictable, strong, energetic.That's a little more consistent with the event the church remembers on this day.

The scene is Jerusalem, 33 A.D., late spring - on the Jewish Feast Day called Pentecost a group of bewildered and frightened friends of Jesus were still in the city several weeks after those monumental events of arrest and crucifixion. They were hiding, I believe: not eagerly waiting for futher instructions from God about what to do next, but in the simplest sense, lying low from the authorities who would have arrested them for their association with Jesus, waiting for an opportunity to sneak out of town and head back to Galilee where the old life beckoned. And then, on Pentecost, something happened to them that they couldn't begin to explain. The description Luke wrote in the Acts of the Apostles is wonderful poetry. God came very close to them. The Spirit of God, the breath, wind, essence of God, a Holy Spirit - came to them - as in tongues of burning, powerful fire and the insistent strength of a rushing wind, and they knew, together and as individuals, as they had not known before, the reality of God's love in Jesus Christ, and they were able to communicate it - were compelled to communicate it, as they had not been able to before.

It is an experience of such enormous energy and immediacy that we must remain a respectful distance from it. It is a mistake to focus on those poetic images alone: it is not possible to recreate it. What is important is the experience of God coming close.

At the Last Supper Jesus had told the disciples that something like this would happen. They would not be alone after he died. God would come to them. The old King James Version translated a very ambigious Greek word "comforter" and so several centuries of English speaking Christians have concluded that God's Spirit essentially comforts his people. What Jesus really said, God would send us an advocate, a counselor, a helper. The point is that God could be counted on not to abandon his people: he would be close - as comforter in their distress and grief but as a power and energy source and as disturber, perhaps, when they became too comfortable.

Long before, in the ancient stories of Israel, God is characterized, kneeling in the mud of a river bank, lovingly fashioning a human being out of the clay and breathing life into it. And that closeness - that incredible intimacy is what the Bible wants to affirm in the idea of the Holy Spirit. That breath of God - that divine energy - which is human life - is "Ruah" in Hebrew - the Spirit of God.

Distinguished theologian Hans Kung acknowledges the problems we have with the notion, and is helpful in teaching that "The Spirit is no other than God himself. The Holy Spirit is not a third party, not a thing between God and us, but God's personal closeness to us." The old formula

is God in three persons: persons - from the Latin Persona - the masks actors used to wear in Greek drama - the masks God wears - the personalities God adopts. God the Father - or Creator, God the Son - present in history in Jesus, God the Spirit - God's closeness, nearness, presence in the world and our lives.

Now, there are problems with that, obviously as anyone knows who has had to explain to a child that the Holy Ghost is not really a Ghost. Worse yet, Trinitarian language sometimes fosters a confusing belief system which includes not one God - but three. Traditional language about the Trinity - God in three persons, and traditional prayers addressed to Christ - Holy Spirit - as well as God - make it virtually impossible for non-Christians to understand that we are monotheists, that we really only have one God. In the rash of attempts at dialogue with Muslims, following the Iranian hostage crises, many of us were chagrined to discover that Muslim students, strongly monotheistic, observing us and taking our vocabulary literally, had concluded that Christians believe in three dieties.

Hans Kung writes: "the Spirit still remains, for many, theologically absolutely unintelligible... Are we not imposing on modern (men and women) a burden of faith that many are no longer prepared to bear?" [Does God Exist, p. 696] My favorite story about the matter used to be told by the late Cardinal Cushing. The Cardinal was walking in downtown Boston one day when a man in front of him fell suddenly, the victim of a heart attack apparently. The Cardinal knelt beside him immediately, leaned over and said, "My Son, are you a Catholic?" There was no response. "Are you a Chrsitian?" Again, nothing. "Do you believe in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit?" At this the man opened one eye, and to the crowd that had gathered, said: "Here I am dying and he's asking me riddles."

It is helpful to recall that the doctrine, the idea of the Holy Spirit, like all doctrine, originally was intended to describe human experience. The Bible is very short on intellectual speculation. There are no philosophic or theological arguments in the Bible about the existence of God. Rather there are stories about people and how they experienced God. The doctrine of the Holy Spirit was not created by a convocation of learned scholars. Rather it was forced on the church by an experience people kept having.

And that experience can be characterized primarily by two words: God's closeness - and God's energy... And that thrusts us suddenly into the 20th century.

The issue that hangs over this exercise, after all, is very simply one of basic integrity. Is there a God? Is there a God who in anyway matters to me in this life I must live in the world?

We are Christians in a time and place that is radically secular. The context for this or any sermon, after all, is a world which doesn't regard esoteric dogmas with even passing interest. Christendom - the part of the world in which Christianity prevails is no longer with us. And it has happened in our life-time.

In the Western Pennsylvania town of my childhood, the theological assumptions of the community were expressed in the fact that there was no commercial activity on Sunday: no stores were open, no public entertainment, movies, bowling alleys and, of course, no bars or restaurants. The assumption beyond that expression of Christendom was that God wanted things to be like that on Sunday, or at least that the majority of people didn't want their church - going interfered with. I sometimes muse about what my grandmother, who believed there was a moral and theological principle worth defending in the struggle to keep the stores closed on Sunday, would think if she could see what transpires in front of her grandson's manse on the Sabbath afternoon and evening...

We no longer see ourselves as actors in a drama which has something to do fundamentally with God. The problem is atheism - that is to say. Not the heavy handed, state sponsored atheism - which is itself a religion, a kind of reverse negative image of Christendom. That is dead too. Some of the most hopeful developments for religion are in nations where the official position is atheism. Madalyne Murray O'Hare's variety of belligerency is not the problem. The problem is the practical atheism of our culture: the irrelevance of God on Michigan Avenue. It is simply the environment in which we find ourselves, descriptively characterized by Harry Cox as "The Secular City."

Wallace Stevens got it in a haunting poem - "Sunday Morning" - the reflections of a woman who used to go to church but now spends her Sunday mornings at home:

> "Complacencies of the peignoir, and late
> coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,
> And the green freedom of a cockatoo
> Upon a rug mingle to dissipate
> The holy hush of ancient sacrifice..."

Gentle, unintentional atheism is the problem; a world view that simply has no room in it for God. The secularity of our culture was anticipated and proclaimed abrasively by Frederick Nietzsche, in the last century. In a novel, a madman announces to a startled crowd of people: "Where is God gone? We have killed him...you and I! God is dead... There never was a greater event... What are these churches now, if they are not the tombs and monuments of God?" [The Gay Science, see Radical Theology and The Death of God, T.J.J. Altizer, W. Hamilton, pp. 25, 26]

Donald Benedict, Chicago Churchman, caught the essence of the dilemma in a widely quoted vignette to the effect that "the task of the church in the city is very simply to keep alive the rumor that there is a God."

The simple fact is that what you did this morning by getting up, getting dressed and coming to church, made you part of a minority, a counter culture, if you will. The problem is benign atheism.

It is not helpful to pretend that Christendom is alive and well... or to assume that if we just insist on our prerogatives in this friendly culture and either shout loud enough - or worse yet - draw our

ecclesiastical robes around us in isolated splendor - all will be well. All will not be well.

We must, I propose, acknowledge that our world is different... that in many ways we do have answers to questions no one is asking any longer - and that our first responsibility - as church and as individuals - is to hear the questions and respond to them... "Is there anything here? Is there a God who matters?" In saying our "yes" to that, may I propose two images of God which are different - but Biblical. God's closeness and God's energy to supplement that older symbol of a heavenly dove... God as creative energy... God as the force that organizes chaos into order... God as the power that takes primal matter and makes universes and solar systems and DNA and photosynthesis and lettuce. God as that incredible force which has moved through time with ever renewing energy, in evolutionary magnificence, from single cell amoebas to sharks and Mountain Gorillas, pausing for this moment in time in Homo Sapiens. God as that energy which makes us alive... God as that which drives us - God as that which calls music out of Mozart even when he doesn't acknowledge it - and a world-record effort out of the lonely marathoner, and the vital passion out of VanGogh - and the unflagging devotion to the task of the research chemist. God as energy - God as that in us that makes us want and need each other - that compels us toward each other in love... God as the energy in us to continue creation, in both our sexuality but also our revulstion at the thought of nuclear suicide. God as the creative agitation to change - in the world - in the church - and in our lives. God as energy...

It is God's Spirit, I submit, that makes the church always a little dissatisfied with itself; incapable in its better moments - of resting on its laurels and living off its past. It is God's Spirit that raises up reformers when things are getting stagnant - Luther - Calvin - Jane Adams - Bonhoeffer - Dorothy Day - Martin Luther King, Jr., John 23 - Coretta King - Desmond Tuto - Alan Boesek... It is God's Spirit, I submit, that causes the church to be embarrassed by its own brokenness; God's agitating Spirit that forces the issue of ecumenicism and judges us for settling into our provincialism and hiding behind our comfortable parochialism.

God's presence is known - is available to us - but, unfortunately we have been persuaded that the ecstatic part of Pentecost, the intoxication with the spirit and speaking in tongues is the only evidence. I submit, however, that it is in a sense of God's closeness, a sense of vitality and life and energy that God comes to us. When we know we are not alone, but are in the presence of one who cares about us, accepts us, loves us - that is the Holy Spirit. When life calls us to walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death and we discover, personally, the truth of the beloved promise: "I will fear no evil, for thou art with me," that is the Holy Spirit.

And when life depletes us - when we have given and given and given - to family, job, community, church... When we are emotionally and spiritually winded and we discover that we are fed and renewed somehow and strengthened to go on - that is the Holy Spirit.

And that pressure to change ourselves and our world - that too is the Spirit of that energetic God who came at Pentecost. God, I believe, makes

us dissatisfied with anything in ourselves that is less than we could be. God, I believe, makes us impatient and dissatisfied with a world that is less just and whole and good and clean and pure than it could be.

I believe the urgency for peace and justice in the world is of God: that the outside agitator for racial justice and economic justice is always God's Spirit.

"Veni Spiritus Sanctus." "Come Holy Spirit" the early church prayed... "Come with quickening power..." It is the experience of 20 centuries of Christian history that God does come to comfort, heal and forgive... and also to stir up, agitate and energize. so let us add our voices to that ancient prayer - in our day -

"Come Holy Spirit" - or - using words of a lovely American Appalachian hymn:

"The lone, wild bird in lofty flight
Is still with thee, nor leave thy sight.
And I am thine! I rest in thee.
Great Spirit, come, and rest in me."

Amen.